The Duma election in Russia, December 2007

Stephen White*
Department of Politics, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8RT, UK

1. Background

Under the 1993 Constitution, elections take place to the lower house of the Russian parliament, the State Duma, every four years. The detailed procedures are set out in a series of more specific laws, on electoral procedures in general and on the Duma election in particular. There is a separate election to the presidency every four years, most recently in March 2008. Following the December 2007 Duma election, President Putin suggested that the two campaigns might be more clearly separated in time, to avoid an 'endless sequence of elections'.[1] In practice, up to the present, the presidential campaign begins almost immediately the Duma results have been declared; indeed, the Duma election has, not unreasonably, been described as a 'presidential primary' (Shevtsova, 2003).

2. Electoral system

The current Duma election law, adopted in 2005 as part of a series of measures designed to strengthen executive authority (following a hostage-taking crisis in Beslan, northern Caucasus), departs in important respects from those that preceded it. In particular, it dropped the requirement that 225 of the Duma's 450 seats be allocated to single-member constituencies throughout the country, with the result determined by simple majority. From 2007 onwards the new Duma was to be composed entirely of deputies elected by party list, subject to a 7% (previously 5%) threshold, with the allocation of seats determined by the 'Hare' system (Election Law, Art. 83). An amendment to the law in 2006 removed the previous opportunity to vote 'against all' candidates and party lists. Another amendment, in 2007, removed the minimum turnout requirement, which had previously been 25%.[2] The effect of these and other changes was to strengthen even further the Kremlin's ability to secure a parliament dominated by its supporters but with a smaller element of (largely token) opposition.

Under the election law, elections are called by the President, and take place on the first Sunday of the month in which the constitutional powers of the outgoing Duma expire. Putin signed a decree to this effect on 2 September, calling the election for Sunday, 2 December 2007. Under the terms of the new election law, parties represented in the outgoing Duma have the right to nominate a list of candidates without further formalities. Other parties must either submit to the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) the signatures of at least 200,000 electors or pay an electoral deposit of 60 m roubles (about $2.5 m). If more than 5% of the signatures are invalid, or if the number of

* Tel.: +44 141 330 5352; fax: +44 141 330 5071.
E-mail address: s.white@socsci.gla.ac.uk

[1] *Izvestiya*, 4 December 2007, p. 3.

[2] For Russian speakers, the current law, incorporating these changes, may be consulted at the Central Electoral Commission's website: www.cikrf.ru.

signatures falls below the minimum (once invalid signatures have been excluded), the party is refused registration. This decision may be challenged in the Supreme Court.

The CEC completed its deliberations on 28 October. Of the 14 parties seeking registration, three were represented in the outgoing Duma: United Russia, the Communist Party, and the Liberal-Democratic Party. Four parties registered by paying the electoral deposit: Union of Right Forces, Yabloko, Patriots of Russia, and Fair Russia. The remaining parties sought to register by collecting signatures. Three were found to have an excessive number of invalid signatures (the Greens, the People's Union, and the Peace and Unity Party), but the Agrarian Party, Civic Force, the Democratic Party of Russia, and the Party of Social Justice satisfied the legal requirements. Thus 11 parties eventually appeared on the ballot paper, with a total of 4684 candidates on their lists.[3]

3. Electoral campaign

From the start of the campaign, there were no doubts that the Kremlin's favoured party, United Russia, would take the larger share of the vote and seats. But it was important to the government that turnout be at such a level that the outcome could not seriously be questioned, so the government's candidate for the presidential election in March 2008 (Dmitri Medvedev) would start as the clear favourite. It was also important that United Russia should win at least two-thirds of the Duma's seats so that it had the majority necessary to pass federal constitutional laws as well as ordinary legislation. In the event, United Russia chose to associate itself very closely with the Russian president, presenting itself as 'Putin's party' and the election itself as a 'referendum on Putin'.

The voting forecasts published by the Levada Centre and other leading agencies left little doubt that United Russia would dominate the new Duma, and that the result was likely to be a massive endorsement of 'Putin's plan'. Accordingly, there was a certain logic to the Russian president agreeing to head the United Russia list, although he was not – and did not become – a party member. Moreover, Putin's occasional addresses set the tone of the campaign.

A rally for his supporters at Luzhniki stadium in Moscow was particularly notable as the first speech in which Putin called directly for Russia's electors to support United Russia. It contained a sharp attack on the integrity of his political opponents, accusing them of ''slinking around Western embassies'' for their support.[4] In that speech and in others, including an address to the diplomatic corps shortly before election day, Putin repeatedly insisted that Russia would not allow its political choices to be ''corrected from outside''.[5] Official spokesmen made clear that they had in the mind the way in which (in their view) the electoral process in other post-Soviet republics had been used to set off a series of 'coloured revolutions' that had actually been intended to convert them into Western clients.

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[3] *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 29 October 2007, p. 1 and 30 October 2007, p. 2.
[4] *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 22 November 2007, pp. 2–3.
[5] *Kommersant*, 29 November 2007, p. 4.

United Russia called its manifesto ‘‘Putin’s Plan: A worthy future for a great country’’.[6] Russia, it was claimed, was following a strategy to ensure that it became one of the ‘‘world centres of political and economic influence, cultural and moral attraction’’, a strategy that guaranteed a ‘‘new quality of life for all the country’s citizens’’. During the coming four years it would mean ‘‘the further development of Russia as a unique civilisation’’, a more competitive economy, and the full implementation of the ‘‘national projects’’ that Putin first set out in a speech to the government in September 2005. The ‘projects’ included health, education, housing, and agriculture. There would also be ‘‘significant increases’’ in pay and pensions, support for the institutions of civil society, and a further strengthening of Russian sovereignty and defensive capacity to give Russia a ‘‘worthy place in a multipolar world’’. Putin was described as Russia’s ‘‘national leader’’, which had the ‘‘political support’’ of United Russia.

Only two of the other parties could be regarded as serious competitors, although hardly an electoral challenge. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation, led by Gennadii Zyuganov, had won seats in all the previous Duma elections, although it had been conspicuously less successful in 2003 (12.6% of the vote) than in earlier contests. The party had traditionally appealed to left-wing opinion, and to those who were nostalgic for the social guarantees of the Soviet era (and were often older than other voters), but it also appealed to a ‘national-patriotic’ constituency. In this latter respect, its position did not differ from that of the Kremlin itself. The list, headed by Zyuganov, included Nobel laureate Zhores Alferov and Nikolai Kharitonov, the party’s candidate in the 2004 presidential candidate. Zyuganov’s stance was that the Communist Party would seek to destroy the ‘‘three-way alliance of bureaucrats, oligarchs and bandits’’ running the country, and to safeguard the interests of ordinary people through a more ‘‘equitable distribution of the national wealth’’.[7]

The other party was Vladimir Zhirinovsky’s Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR). The party appealed to a more stridently nationalist constituency, but its appeal normally owed a great deal to Zhirinovsky himself. Zhirinovsky had led the party since its foundation in 1990 and was an outspoken, charismatic campaigner. The LDPR’s list was headed by Andrei Lugovoi (wanted in the United Kingdom in connection with the murder of former KGB agent Alexander Litvinenko) and included Zhirinovsky and his son Igor Lebedev. The LDPR manifesto represented the party as the country’s ‘‘constructive opposition’’. So far, it claimed, only officials and oligarchs had gained from 16 years of economic reform, and called for oil and gas resources to be taken back from the oligarchs; it also called for a progressive income tax, with the rich paying more. And there should be an ‘‘active multivector foreign policy’’, with its primary emphasis on Russia’s southern neighbours and the possibility of the voluntary reintegration of the former Soviet republics into a new ‘Russian Empire’.[8]

Of the other parties, Fair Russia was a combination of Rodina (a broadly ‘left-patriotic’ party that had fought the previous election as a Kremlin-friendly opposition), together with the Pensioners’ Party and the Russian Party of Life.

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[6] See *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 9 November 2007, p. 14.
[7] *Vremya novostei*, 24 September 2007, p. 2.
[8] *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 8 November 2007, p. 12.

A socialist perspective for Russia, claimed the party's manifesto, involved a socially oriented economy, a strong state under democratic control, and a dynamically developing society. It also meant policies that reflected the interests of the majority of the population, a fair distribution of incomes, protection from poverty and official arbitrariness, social security, and accessible health and educational systems. Fair Russia shared the LDPR's view that taxation should be more progressive, and that salaries should be raised for all who worked in the state sector. Not surprisingly, given the party's origins, there was a considerable emphasis on pensions.[9] Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces, as in previous elections, appealed most directly to those who shared their commitment to broadly western and liberal-democratic values. Debate among these various choices was limited by United Russia's refusal to take part in television discussions, although – like the other parties – it took full advantage of its opportunities for free radio, television, and newspaper publicity.

4. Election results

The exit polls reported by national television as soon as the last polling stations had shut were very close to the final results and very close to the forecasts made during the campaign by the main survey agencies.[10] The results, accordingly, were hardly a surprise. From the official standpoint, there was evident satisfaction that the results were very close to the final survey predictions, which suggested that falsification of whatever kind had been minimal.[11]

Turnout was relatively high: 63.7%. Certainly, higher than the 55.8% recorded in 2003. Commenting on the results, Putin was gratified by the confidence placed in United Russia's list of candidates; and he was pleased that the four parties that reached the threshold had, between them, secured 90% of the vote (the outgoing Duma represented only 70% of the vote). This, Putin thought, would enhance the legitimacy of the new Duma.[12] A more obvious consequence was that, with 64% of the vote and 70% of the seats in the hands of United Russia, and with two of the other three parties that had won seats favourably disposed towards it, the new Duma would be even more completely in the hands of the Kremlin administration (Table 1).

Table 1
Results of the Duma election in Russia, 2 December 2007.

Party	Votes	Votes (%)	Seats
United Russia	44714241	64.3	315
Communist Party of the Russian Federation	8046886	11.6	57
Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia	5660823	8.1	40

[9] *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 14 November 2007, p. 18.
[10] See, for instance, the Levada Centre's monthly forecasts at http://www.russiavotes.org/duma/duma_vote_trends.php#008 (accessed 27.06.08.)
[11] See the Levada Centre's forecast of 30 November at http://www.levada.ru/press/2007120304.html (accessed 27.06.08.), which put United Russia on 62.8% and the Communists on 11.2%. Other forecasts and he exit polls are reported in *Izvestiya,* 5 December 2007, p. 2.
[12] *Izvestiya*, 4 December 2007, p. 3. For a fuller account, including evidence from a post-election survey on voting choices, see McAllister and White (2008).

Fair Russia: Rodina/Pensioners/Life	5383639	7.7	38
Agrarian Party of Russia	1600234	2.3	-
Yabloko	1108985	1.5	-
Civic Force	733604	1.1	-
Union of Right Forces	669444	1.0	-
Patriots of Russia	615417	0.9	-
Party of Social Justice	154083	0.2	-
Democratic Party of Russia	89780	0.1	-
Electorate	109145517		
Vote cast	69537065		
Invalid votes	759929	1.1	-
Turnout		63.7	

Source: based on the Central Electoral Commission communiqué published in *Vestnik Tsentral'noi izbiratel'noi komissii Rossiiskoi Federatsii* no. 19 (222), 2007, pp. 5–22.

Although there could be no question that Putin and United Russia enjoyed a high level of public support, the Council of Europe/OSCE observation mission was less satisfied about the manner in which the victory was achieved. The merging of party and state was an ''abuse of political power and a clear violation of international commitments and standards''; the media had been heavily biased in favour of Putin and United Russia; the new election law made it extremely difficult for smaller parties to compete; and there had been ''widespread reports of harassment of opposition parties''.[13] Moreover, there was no larger mission from the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, as in previous elections, because the OSCE was unable to accept the terms on which it was invited to operate. Indeed, there was some indication that the Russian authorities would seek to question the entire international monitoring framework.

5. Effects

The election had no direct implications for the composition of the Russian government; under the Constitution, the government is accountable to the president rather than parliament. However, it established a propitious environment for the government to advance its favoured candidate to the presidency: first deputy Prime Minister, Dmitri Medvedev. On 17 December it was announced that United Russia and three other minor parties had agreed to nominate him as their candidate for the presidency, with Putin's explicit support. The following day Medvedev indicated that he would nominate Putin to the premiership if he, Medvedev, was successful in the presidential election due on 2 March 2008. This resolved the succession question that had troubled domestic and foreign opinion for some years – what would happen when Putin stepped down, as he was obliged to do, at the end of his second consecutive term – and left the constitution unaltered. It was less clear if it would be a temporary change or a more enduring departure from what had otherwise been a heavily, even super-presidential, system.

[13] See http://assembly.coe.int/asp/press/stoppressview.asp?id¼1979 (accessed 27.06.08.).

Acknowledgements

The support of the ESRC under grant RES-000-22-2532 and the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland is gratefully acknowledged.

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doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2008.07.002